

The Debate Over Stem Cell Research: We cannot let politics, partisanship put lives at risk

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By Russ Carnahan

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I am proud to be a co-sponsor of current legislation in the U.S. Congress to increase federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. Stem cells hold great potential for curing any number of diseases, including diabetes, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, ALS, heart disease, and cancer, as well as spinal cord injuries. Many in our community suffer from these debilitating conditions, and they and their families look to this groundbreaking research with continued hope for cures.

Scientists believe that stem cell research holds extraordinary promise and could yield a host of what are normally once-in-a-generation medical breakthroughs. Stem cells are the most primitive and pliant of human cells, unique in their capacity to develop into almost any type cell type, including brain, blood, heart tissue and nerve. This means researchers could use them to replace or repair diseased cells in patients' bodies. Scientists working on this research believe it may point to lifesaving, disease-defeating breakthroughs.

Unfortunately, much of their work is on hold because of drastic restrictions imposed by the Bush administration in 2001. These limited the number of embryonic stem cell lines available for research to 19, many of which are contaminated beyond use. We must ease these crippling restrictions and set reasonable, ethical standards to move this medical research forward.

Doctors and scientists, many working here in St. Louis, have struggled to find useable embryonic stem cell lines. Some have had to rely completely on limited private funding for their research, which has slowed their efforts significantly. While they are delayed, lives are being lost.

Other researchers, because of the politicization of what should be a medical research issue, are taking their expertise to other countries; we have lost too many leaders in their fields as a result.

Support for embryonic stem cell research transcends partisanship. More than 200 members of Congress, along with such organizations such as the American Diabetes Association and the Parkinson's Action Network, have voiced their support for this bipartisan legislation. Together we will make sure that the current policy of stifling science and chilling research will not end the promise of cures for millions of Americans.

U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, is a member of the House Science Committee and its research subcommittee.